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ABSTRACT

A status report on the use of the Initial Teaching Alphabet (i.t.a.) is presented by the i.t.a. Foundation, an independent, non-profit organization which conducts and supports i.t.a. programs and research. In reviewing the 70 studies which compare i.t.a. programs to traditional orthography (T.O.) programs, it has been found that two-thirds of the studies indicate that i.t.a. is more successful in teaching beginning reading and writing skills than the T.O. approach. The remaining one-third of the studies shows that i.t.a. is equally as successful as T.O. in teaching reading. No studies show adverse effects of using the i.t.a. approach. It is emphasized that the studies conducted were highly varied and were done in a variety of school situations in a number of countries. The report replies to frequently occurring criticisms of the i.t.a. program, such as (1) children who learn i.t.a. have difficulty transferring to T.O., (2) children regress to i.t.a. after they have moved into a T.O. class, (3) i.t.a. materials are expensive, and (4) children in i.t.a. programs experience the Hawthorne effect (learn better because they are participating in an innovative program). It is argued that such criticisms are not supported with evidence or research and that the research on i.t.a. can refute such claims. Further research is encouraged by an offer from the i.t.a. Foundation. (AL)

i.t.a. - A STATUS REPORT - 1971

The Beginning of a Second Decade

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This year, i.t.a. will be eight years old in the United States, ten in Great Britain, and over a hundred in tradition and philosophy.

In 1961, twenty schools in Great Britain initiated the first controlled study of i.t.a. Two years later, in 1963, approximately 600 children in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania, participated in the first i.t.a. study conducted in the United States. Since these early experimental beginnings, it is estimated that almost two million children have learned to read with this new alphabet. There are i.t.a. classes throughout the United Kingdom, in every state in the United States and every Canadian province.

Since i.t.a. began, the number of publishers has increased from the original British one (James) Nisbet and Company, Ltd., which transliterated its **Janet and John** into i.t.a.) to almost one hundred corporations involved in the production of i.t.a. materials. At the present time, there are over two thousand titles of children's books available in i.t.a., and a vast array of supplemental educational materials. This in itself is remarkable evidence of growth and diffusion.

One Million Dollars in i.t.a. Research is Enough

I am aware of over seventy studies which have attempted to use some kind of control group for comparison purposes with an i.t.a. group to estimate the effectiveness of i.t.a. (There are many more than seventy, but many have been based on subjective conclusions and observations unsupported by comparison data and not analyzed with the usual statistical tools available to research investigators.) Of the over seventy studies which would meet the criteria of the use of control groups, a conservative estimate suggests that over 35,000 children have been involved in the studies. Few educational innovations can claim as much research over as long a period of time.

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To evaluate this research, it is important to note that the variability of these studies makes one more confident in generalizing from the results than might otherwise be the case. A wide variety of measures of reading, writing, and other language arts skills have been used; thus, the findings are not peculiar to a single definition of reading. Both small and large-scale studies have been conducted. In addition, a wide range of students and teachers have been involved in the various experimental and control groups. The studies have been performed in urban, suburban, and rural locations in all of the major geographic areas of each country. The children have ranged from those who are severely educationally disadvantaged to those who are intellectually gifted. The teachers have been of all varieties and levels of experience. With all this variety, it is important to note that the pattern of research results remains the same, and in fact is so clear that one can reasonably predict the results of any set of studies with considerable confidence.

i.t.a. Superiority a Predictable Finding

Reading Test Results: If a hypothetical group of 100 investigators in different schools were to begin separate studies of the effectiveness of i.t.a. vs. T.O., I believe that the overall results of these studies would show several things: the probability is that two-thirds of the studies will demonstrate that i.t.a. children perform at a higher level than children taught with T.O. The remaining one-third will find no significant difference between the experimental and control groups and **no** study will find any generally adverse effects associated with i.t.a. (By now the "fears" of educators and laymen alike should have been eliminated.) It is interesting to note that this pattern of approximately two-thirds of the studies producing positive findings has not changed over time. The ratio of two reports out of three being favorable to i.t.a. has held year after year. If anything there has been a slight increase in the percent of positive findings.

Since most reading measures include a wide variety of sub-tests, it should be possible to predict the probable pattern of results when the dependent variable is such a measure. If the sub-scales can be combined into an overall index of reading ability, the chances are quite great that the i.t.a. children will be found to be at a significantly higher level than the T.O. children. Analyzing the probable pattern of sub-test findings, I would predict a high probability of finding a significant difference favoring the i.t.a. group in those sub-tests identified with such terms as word recognition, word meaning, word study skills,

reading sentences, etc. That is, on decoding measures on sub-tests dealing with issues such as paragraph meaning, vocabulary or comprehension, it is somewhat more probable that the study will show no significant differences, but there may still be about one chance in four or five that the i.t.a. children will again score higher. An alphabet does not provide meaning. Nonetheless there will be a few studies indicating an advantage for the i.t.a. children.

Spelling Test Results: While some of us seem to care a great deal about accurate spelling there are others who care much less. Nonetheless, one of the criticisms of i.t.a. is that children taught with it may not be able to spell properly in our conventional alphabet afterwards. The Foundation has recently reviewed 47 studies which measured the relative spelling effectiveness of i.t.a. and T.O. taught children at the end of first, second and subsequent grades. In each case, the spelling measures used were in traditional orthography (as indeed is the case for all of the results referred to here). A consistent pattern emerges from the studies. At the end of the first year of instruction (when an average of 2/3 to 3/4 of the i.t.a. students will have made the transition to T.O.) studies are about as likely to find that the i.t.a. children spell more poorly, the same, or better than the T.O. children. Thus at first grade there is no clear indication of the superiority or inferiority of i.t.a. children as compared with T.O. children when spelling in T.O. is the outcome measure.

The results at the end of second grade are different. Here the odds are about 2 to 1 that the study will show that i.t.a. children spell significantly **better.** One-third of the studies will show no difference in spelling and once again, (as is consistently true for i.t.a. studies with all outcome measures) there will be no evidence at the end of second grade that the i.t.a. children can't spell as well as children taught with T.O.

The review of spelling studies that go beyond second grade will indicate that in over half there will be no significant difference in spelling, while the others will show the i.t.a. children continue to spell better.

If one were to summarize the results it would be clear that once children have completed their i.t.a. training (by the end of the second grade) they spell as well or better than their T.O. taught classmates. This does not necessarily mean that i.t.a. children are **good** spellers. It is just that they are as good or better than children taught with T.O.

Writing Results: If the nature of the study involves an analysis of children's writing, the probable results are that i.t.a. children will typically write longer and more complex stories using a more extensive vocabulary than T.O. children. They will do so with less direct assistance from the teacher, being far less likely to ask the teacher how to spell words, etc. Further, their writing style is likely to be much more like their speech than would be the case with T.O. children. It must be noted, however, that since there are no standardized tests of writing ability for young children, these results will be based on simple frequency counts of words, or other parts of speech, supplemented by subjective ratings of the quality of the written material.

Attitudes and Behavior: It is highly probable that the investigator may wish to know something about the attitudes and behavior of the i.t.a. children. Here the data is likely to be highly subjective, since adequately reliable, valid, and objective measures of such variables are not available. Nonetheless, to the extent that teacher observations are valid we would find teachers consistently reporting the behavior of children in i.t.a. groups to reflect high levels of self-confidence, independent behavior, and generally positive attitudes towards school. There seems to be a consistent tendency for teachers to note that i.t.a. children seem to enjoy school to a far greater degree than children they had previously taught using T.O.

Teacher and Parent Responses

Some studies may wish to use a measure of teacher attitudes toward i.t.a. as part of the evaluation. i.t.a. teachers' responses are almost certain to reflect the belief that they are having more success with i.t.a. than they previously had experienced, although they will be quick to point out that they had always felt that they were doing a good job. Their reaction to their desire to teach with T.O. again would probably range from, "I would flatly refuse" to "I would prefer not to."

If parents are asked about their reactions to i.t.a. they are almost certain to be nearly uniformly enthusiastic.

How Much Hawthorne Effect?

When these positive results are published, the author of the report will acknowledge the possible influence of the Hawthorne effect and his critics will attribute all of his results to it. It would be worthwhile here to examine the validity of this criticism. In its simplest form, the Hawthorne effect represents the fact that simply because subjects of a study (both teachers and students) know that they are part of a study and are treated differently in some way, they will perform at a higher level almost independently of variables

being manipulated in the particular investigation. Undoubtedly, **some** of the results attributable to i.t.a. may be a reflection of the "Hawthorne effect." I would contend, however, that the effects seem to be of sufficient duration that it would probably be the longest lasting "Hawthorne effect" on record. Not only do investigators commonly find significant advantages for i.t.a. children the first time they conduct a study, but these advantages hold during the second and subsequent years as well. In fact, some studies indicate that teachers perform **more** effectively in the second year than they did in the first. **Few** educational innovations can show as consistent and far-reaching effects as i.t.a.

Reasons for Resistance to and Criticisms of i.t.a.

Reviewing the status of i.t.a. in 1971 one must acknowledge the great resistance to its adoption which still exists. We now have ten years of experience in England and eight in the United States. As noted there have been over 70 studies comparing the effectiveness of i.t.a. versus T.O. as an instructional medium. Literally millions of children have learned to read with the i.t.a. and thus there is a great deal of research and experiential evidence toward which we can turn to answer critics of i.t.a.

The problem is that critics of the alphabet have first, consistently shifted the focus of their criticisms, and secondly, rarely cited research evidence upon which to base their criticisms.

One can argue that when i.t.a. was first introduced it was up to its proponents to establish its claims through the kind of experimental and experiential evidence that is now available. Early critics accused the proponents of i.t.a. of "irresponsible claims." On the basis of the accumulated experience we can now take a look at the early criticisms of i.t.a. and respond to them. Further, we can begin to demand that i.t.a. critics present evidence for their criticisms rather than hint at anxieties or set up "straw-men." Unless they do, they can be accused of "irresponsible criticism."

It is difficult in a short report to respond in detail to each of the vast array of potential "dangers" which have been alluded to by the critics of i.t.a. Suffice it to say here that the Foundation stands prepared to present extensive evidence and experience on each of the points below, although they will be dealt with only briefly in this report.

Among the early criticisms of i.t.a. was the notion that children might have great difficulty in **ever** learning to read in our conventional alphabet and thus upset their entire educational experience. Obviously the accumulated experience denies this completely.

It was then suggested that if indeed children did learn to read with this strange alphabet there might be "undesirable side effects." These "effects" were never identified and no study thus far has found any.

Research in i.t.a. has often been criticized as being inadequate in design or execution in one or more ways. Though it is difficult to present the entire argument here, the Foundation contends that the quality of i.t.a. research is comparable to educational research generally. On the other hand, i.t.a. research exceeds most educational research in its sheer quantity and variety.

When critics have finished challenging the quality of i.t.a. research generally they will often suggest that the difference between the i.t.a. and T.O. groups is negligible. Studies tend to show that there is an advantage of at least 4-6months on most measures taken at grades one and two. However, the most important consideration may be in the information presently being accumulated on reduction in rates of remedial reading. Early reports indicate that there probably are between 1/2 to 1/3 the number of children assigned to remedial reading problems after i.t.a. as compared to previous school records when they used T.O. as the medium of instruction. A good educational beginning, especially when combined with a reduction in reading failure plus consistent reports of generally greater satisfaction on the part of the students and the teachers using i.t.a. is more than a negligible advantage.

Often critics will argue that even if the gains are not negligible, the advantages will "wash out" after a few years. The Foundation has repeatedly noted that i.t.a. stands for "initial teaching alphabet" not "infinite traces alphabet." It seems unreasonable that one or two years experience should outweigh the subsequent two or three years with a particulat T.O. instructional strategy and materials. Children will learn what one teaches them or will fail to learn what one fails to teach. While some share of the credit or blame for a child's performance in later grades must be assumed by i.t.a., a large share must be assumed by the medium of instruction and methods and materials which follow his initial experience.

Sometimes critics will note that after transition children may "regress" to i.t.a. spellings. I contend that this is not usually regression but **expression.** If the child cannot spell correctly a word he wants to write in T.O. he really has two choices if he learned with T.O. He can spell it incorrectly in T.O. - or avoid the word. (We don't know how often the latter occurs in children - but I suspect the incidence is high. It even appears to be high with adults.) The i.t.a. child has these options - but he can also "regress" to i.t.a. characters. He can and is willing to express himself. When the i.t.a. char-

acter appears in his writing, however, the teacher "knows" the cause. This is one of i.t.a.'s biggest problems. When a child performs poorly everyone "knows" the reason. In T.O. we are not so "sure"!

Where a critic acknowledges that there are advantages, and where he doesn't challenge their duration, he may speculate as to whether or not i.t.a. is only good for a particular kind of child. Those studies which have attempted to look at the relationship between I.Q. and socio-economic status with i.t.a. find that there is no interaction effect. This suggests that no particular I.Q. or socio-economic group profits uniquely from i.t.a.

There are those who acknowledge that i.t.a. may be effective but suggest that better alphabets can and should be developed. Viewing the research generally, if i.t.a. is not seen as the "hero" at least T.O. is the "villain". It is theoretically possible that other alphabets could be developed which might be superior to i.t.a. Nonetheless, the fact remains that this has not been demonstrated. One can only wonder how the educational world (which seems to accept so much without evidence of effectiveness from its producers) resists taking advantage of the evidence available for the support of i.t.a., and yet would ask for further improvements in it. It is hard to believe that any other component of our society would consistently resist even modest gains in effectiveness at equivalent costs, and suggest that while the search for perfection continues they are willing to continue with the less adequate.

Critics also focus on problems alleged to be associated with transition. They often suggest that when a child is exposed to i.t.a. in school, and T.O. in newspapers, television, street signs, etc. they will become confused. There is evidence that when children go from a completely consistent medium such as i.t.a., to an inconsistent one such as T.O., there may be a lowering of performance on certain measures. However, the lowered performance still leaves them significantly in advance of children who have learned to read with T.O. We sometimes forget that there are subtle transitions to go through when shifting from print to cursive writing, or reading Uncle Remus stories or dialect material generally. If there is any evidence that transition is a problem then we urge investigation of instructional techniques to overcome it. Even if one accepts that a problem exists, the net result is still superior to beginning instruction in T.O.

Sometimes critics argue that there will be a problem with local accents since i.t.a. is a phonemic alphabet. The fact that it has been used successfully in Scotland, Wales, Liverpool, London, Canada, Australia, a variety of regional areas in the United States, and used to teach English as a second language in a number of European, Asian and African countries, all with reported success, seems not to impress the critics.

Still another criticism of i.t.a. is that it is expensive. At the time of preparation of this report the i.t.a. Foundation is embarking on a cost analysis of i.t.a. versus T.O. materials. Although a complete analysis has not been completed, it appears that the difference in cost is pennies per pupil and may in fact be less for i.t.a. For example, i.t.a. publishers who have T.O. versions of the same material sell the i.t.a. versions at the same or lower prices. The overwhelming proportion of educational costs lie in physical facilities and personnel. A small proportion goes to materials. When one looks further at the material involved for those parts of the first years of instruction which relate to i.t.a. it must be an extremely small proportion of the total budget. If even a modest gain in reading, writing, and attitude were achievable it would be hard to argue against some small increase in cost. Add to this the cost of remedial instruction (materials, equipment, and personnel) which would be reduced if i.t.a. is as successful as we believe, and the savings become quite apparent - savings both in terms of money and the reduction in the number of young people who experience failure in this crucial component of education and life.

Perhaps one of the most recent criticisms to be leveled against i.t.a. is the notion that can be best expressed in the term "transportability." The issue seems to be that if a child begins to learn to read in i.t.a. and then moves and is placed in a T.O. class in a new school, he will experience confusion. The available evidence suggests that when i.t.a. children relocate and are "forced" into T.O. classes, the transition is made with relative ease. While they have typically failed to take full advantage of their i.t.a. experience, transition leaves them equal (and in some cases superior) to those classmates in T.O. Obviously the major impact on a child who moves from one community to another is not the instructional medium but his loss of friends and relocation of environment.

One must also ask the question how many children transfer from one school to another within the first year. This is obviously a high proportion of children in certain areas and much lower in others. Even where the proportion is high, if a child transfers very early in his first month or two it is safe to assume that he has not had much exposure to i.t.a., and probably would have had even less with T.O. Thus children transferring early should not present any difficulty. Similarly, children who have already made the transition would not be affected. Even if the child is close to making the formal transition "transportability" should not be a prob-

lem since there is evidence that transition is a process rather than a single event. Thus the issue seems to be more illusory than real. An obvious solution to such a problem (if one accepts that it is real) is to have both i.t.a. and T.O. classes in schools having more than one beginning reading class.

Needed Research in i.t.a.

With over 70 studies available dealing with the comparative effectiveness of i.t.a. and T.O. the issue seems relatively clear. When it is at its best, our 26 letter alphabet is **sometimes** as effective as i.t.a. While there may be some artifacts that make i.t.a. look more effective than it is, it would be equally plausible to assume that where there are no significant differences, artifacts may have been at work either to make T.O. look more effective than it is or reduce the effectiveness of i.t.a. Thus additional i.t.a. vs. T.O. comparisons will not be productive. Yet further research is desirable.

We have spent over a hundred years trying to determine the most effective strategies for using a 26 letter alphabet. Perhaps very different strategies and different sets of materials would be effective when we assume a much higher correspondence between sounds and characters. Since there is little or no agreement on the most effective way to use 26 letters it seems unreasonable that we should have immediately discovered the "best" ways to use i.t.a. For example: How long should a child be "in" i.t.a.? Are there optimal strategies for accomplishing "transition?" Which "methods" are most effective with this "medium?" Much research would be useful for these and other questions.

In addition, relatively little is known about the use of i.t.a. as a remedial tool, and even less about i.t.a. in teaching English as a second language. Specifically instructional strategies and materials need to be developed and tested in these areas, not to mention special i.t.a. materials for children with learning disabilities.

i.t.a. has an exciting future but first it must overcome resistance to change. In recent testimony before the U.S. House of Representatives Subcommittee on Education it was pointed out that the educational community (including parents and children) is possibly the most vulnerable consumer segment of our society. Little in the field of education is tested adequately prior to being marketed, whether the product be books, equipment, or methods of instruction. It can be responsibly argued that i.t.a. has been **thoroughly** tested experimentally and experientially. The tests and experience have been generally more satisfactory than other approaches to the teaching of the written form of the English language whether the criterion focuses on the passive role in reading, or an active one in writing.

It is the i.t.a. Foundation's contention that while there is much yet to be learned there is no justification for continuing to teach written English to beginners using a 26 letter alphabet.

This conclusion is not unlike those in Warburton and Southgate's study, **i.t.a. an Independent Evaluation,** sponsored by the British School's Council and released in 1970. They concluded:

> "The experimental results so far obtained suggest very strongly that i.t.a. is, in fact, a more efficient medium for teaching reading to beginners than traditional orthography" and "...infants using i.t.a. have learned to read earlier, more easily and at a faster rate than similar children using T.O." and further, "i.t.a. has been extremely well received by practicing teachers, to a degree which suggests that avant-garde enthusiasm and the novelty of the medium are not the sole explanation for its success."

Yet as of this writing very few schools who had not tried i.t.a. before the study agreed even to **try** it in the United Kingdom and fewer yet in the United States.

One can only wonder where a responsible education begins!

The Ultimate in Accountability

As i.t.a. begins its second decade, the i.t.a. Foundation has been the fortunate recipient of the annual income of an estate valued at over six million dollars. The funds were left to the Foundation by the late Eugene Kelly, the former president of Coca-Cola in Canada. Mr. Kelly had had a life-long concern with the difficulties presented in written English, and saw the development of i.t.a. as a major step toward alleviating them.

Armed with the assurance of the success of i.t.a. in the cumulative results of the i.t.a. studies already discussed, and the income to the Foundation from Mr. Kelly's generosity, the i.t.a. Foundation is in a position to make what is probably the broadest guarantees in the field of educational accountability or performance contracting. It covers **any and all** i.t.a. materials and equipment purchased. In addition, the decision with regard to whether the results have been sufficiently satisfactory rests entirely with the schools using **any** criteria they wish.

Basically the system would work as follows: any school wishing to try i.t.a. would select materials and equipment as necessary from any distributor. There would be no limit with regard to amount or kind. The school would decide to evaluate the results over either a one or two year period. They

would be free to use **any** criteria they wish and need not specify them in advance. If for **any** reason the school was not satisfied with the results, they would return the i.t.a. materials to the Foundation for a full refund of monies spent. The only restriction on the school is that if they are dissatisifed they must agree to go back to the same T.O. materials they were using for the "i.t.a. experimental" classes for a period of one year following the "experiment."

Financially, the Foundation is in extremely sound position to make such an offer. Educationally we are certain of the outcome.

The Initial Teaching Alphabet Foundation,
A Non-Profit Educational Foundation
Located at Hofstra University, Hempstead, N.Y. 11550